

A Strange Message

BY DORA RUSSELL.

Author of "Footprints in the Snow," "The Broken Seal," "The Vicar's Governess," "Annabel's Rival,"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MOTHER'S GRIEF.

HE next morning Nora awoke with a confused sense of anxiety and uneasiness from disturbed and painful dreams. She started up, and she rubbed her eyes, and then she remembered—the last look on Malcolm's face as he turned to leave her, his message to her mother, and the bitter task that lay before herself to-day.

And scarcely was she dressed when this was forced upon her. She had not, indeed, left her bedroom when Palmer entered, carrying a message from Mrs. Fraser of Airlinn, who was below, and wished to know if she might come up stairs and speak to Nora at once.

Nora could not quite hide her agitation from Palmer's quick eyes, as she listened to this request. It was, of course, very well known in the household that something unusual had been going on last night—Mrs. Biddulph's late arrival—Alfred's mysterious disappearance, for he had only returned at dawn, and would give no further account of himself, except that Mrs. Stewart had sent him on a message.

Palmer was highly offended by this reticence, and had scarcely spoken to Alfred at breakfast; but the young man, having the pleasing knowledge that he was the happy possessor of £20, part of which he meant to spend on a present for his sweet-heart, had borne her coldness so amiably that Palmer thought it was quite time she was making up to him again.

Still Palmer was intensely curious to know what it was all about; and Mrs. Conway-Hope was more, if possible, curious still. Therefore Palmer noted how, with quickened breath and paling cheeks, her young mistress heard that Mrs. Stewart was below, and wished to see her. And Nora felt she could not refuse this request.

This poor mother must hear the terrible news before the day was over, and it was best to break it to her now. Therefore Nora bade Palmer to bring Mrs. Fraser upstairs, and a few minutes later Mrs. Fraser entered, looking fresh, smiling, and well.

"How are you, my dear?" she said, going up to Nora and kissing her face in her kind, motherly way.

Nora often thought afterward how Mrs. Fraser looked at this moment—so rosy, so happy, a matron in her comely prime, with her eyes blue as poor Malcolm's, brimful of content and good nature.

"I am not feeling very well," hesitated Nora, with her eyes cast down.

"My poor child, I am sorry for that. But it's nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh, no."

"That's all right, then; and, Nora, my dear, what have you done with my boy?"

"I never was so sorry in my life," said Nora, looking down, "but he has retired to bed, that Alfred had arrived with a letter from you for Malcolm, and that Malcolm went back with him to Rosemary in the boat. He'll stay all night here, or go to his uncle Alick's."

"He did not stay here," faltered Nora. "Then he's at uncle Alick's. Jack felt a bit uneasy about it, but Malcolm was not, and he went to bed, and he proposed, as soon as breakfast was over this morning, that we should cross the water and inquire about him. But I told Jack he was quite safe in your hands; and Mrs. Jack laughed."

Poor Nora's face seemed to be growing more difficult every moment. She turned away her head; she gave a little gasping sigh, and the mother's quick ears of love caught it.

"There is nothing the matter, is there?" she asked sharply—"nothing with Malcolm?"

Upon this Nora caught her large firm hand in her cold trembling one, and she fixed her eyes on Nora's changing face with some suspicion in her glance.

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser," she said, "I—I sent for Malcolm last night because he has got into some trouble—because just now he is better away."

"What do you mean?"

Mrs. Jack's voice was almost stern as she asked this question, and she fixed her eyes on Nora's changing face with some suspicion in her glance.

"It is terrible to hear to have to tell you," went on Nora, "most terrible, but, Mrs. Fraser, it was Malcolm who fired the shot, who killed that unhappy woman in the Glen."

"Malcolm?" cried Mrs. Fraser, a sudden flush passing over her face, and pushing Nora's clinging hand away in her quick agitation. "I don't believe a word of it. Who has been telling you this, Nora Stewart?"

"It is only too true, Mrs. Fraser—only too true," answered Nora, turning away her head, and her eyes filling with tears. "This is a bitter task to me, but you must know, and Malcolm, I hope, is safe. By this time he is far away."

"What do you mean? I ask you, what do you mean? You have not sent the boy away, have you, to hide himself, as if he had done some fearful wrong? Where is he? I ask you, what have you done with my son?"

Mrs. Fraser, last night news brought me, such news as almost broke my heart. I was told—it is no invention—that the woman's death in the Glen had been traced to Malcolm, and that to-day this information would be given to the police, and Malcolm would be arrested."

"It is an invention!" answered Mrs. Fraser, with strong indignation. "What had Malcolm done to do with this woman? Nothing? A woman he never saw—a woman, the wife of another man?"

"It was by accident he killed her; but—"

"Then, why did you send him away? Why did you not let him face any inquiry that could be made? My boy would speak the truth to the police, and by accident, he is not one to deny it."

Nora's distress was now very great. It seemed too dreadful to destroy the poor mother's proud confidence in her darling son.

"Where is Jack?" said Nora, greatly agitated. "We had better send for him."

"He is at Alick Fraser's. Yes, send for his father, and Jack will tell you, as I do, that we have not taught our boy to run away and hide himself, whatever he has done."

Nora rang the bell and sent Alfred for Jack Fraser, and in the meanwhile Mrs. Fraser continued in a state of strong excitement and indignation. She began walking up and down the room, glancing occasionally angrily at Nora.

"I suppose," she said presently, "that Mr. Biddulph is at the bottom of this?"

He wants to shift suspicion from his own shoulders to those of my boy."

Nora did not speak. This was too unjust, she felt; but her heart was so full of pity for the unhappy mother that she could not resist it.

"This man has brought nothing but mischief and trouble," went on Mrs. Jack. "But if he thinks he can make a scapegoat of poor Malcolm he shall find he is mistaken. Did you hear this story from him, Nora? I will hear the truth."

"Wait till Cousin Jack comes," said Nora, gently, "I can tell him better than I can tell you."

"Why? Am I not his mother? Is his honor not mine? Answer me, Nora Stewart, is it this man Biddulph who has been blackening Malcolm's name?"

"No, it is not," answered Nora, lifting her dark eyes to Mrs. Fraser's indignant face. "Mr. Biddulph has acted in this matter, as he always does, with the greatest consideration and kindness."

"You think no one is like him, that is the fact," cried Mrs. Jack. "But, Nora, she added, going up to her husband, who at this moment rapped at the room door, 'come in, and hear what Nora Stewart has got to tell us. She says Malcolm—'

'Malcolm—killed that woman in the Glen!'

Jack Fraser's brown face grew pale at these words, and a look of fear came into his brown eyes.

"Malcolm?" he repeated, looking first at his wife and then at Nora. "What?"

"Yes, our dear boy; and she has got him to go away—to hide himself, instead of facing such a lie like a man."

"What is this, Nora?" now asked Jack Fraser, still with that look of uneasiness on his face.

"Oh, Jack, all this is dreadful for me!" answered Nora, taking her half-cousin's hand in her own. "But—but I acted for the best, and you know the whole story you will think I acted for the best."

"Where is Malcolm?" said Jack Fraser. "Far away from here, I hope, Jack. Do you know a man named Sanford Hill—a man somehow connected with your brother Alick?"

"Of course I do. Sandy Hill—why he is Alick's clerk at Glasgow."

"He has been down here, then," continued Nora. "And when he heard of the news, he went to the sheriff and offered at the inquiry at Balla for information that would lead to the arrest of the person who killed that woman in the Glen, he went about spying and listening, as far as he could, and he heard that Rob Mackenzie was talking to his brother."

"Rob Mackenzie?" exclaimed Jack Fraser, with a scared face.

"Yes; the poor lad was talking to his brother, and he was very angry. He was best to break it to her now. Therefore Nora bade Palmer to bring Mrs. Fraser upstairs, and a few minutes later Mrs. Fraser entered, looking fresh, smiling, and well."

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my dear, but still, you have mine. Thank you for getting him away. It—it would have been worse for Jeanie if he had stayed; and Jack Fraser put his hand over his face to hide his tears.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BLOW FALLS.

The same morning, as the clock was striking twelve in the hall at Dunbar, Jack was sitting with bent head over his desk, and he had a look of gloom upon his face. He had been thinking of the unhappy woman in the Glen, and he was wondering how he could help her.

"My poor Jeanie, it's no use," answered Jack with a groan. "If Malcolm's hands were clear, why did he go away? And, Jeanie, I haven't told you, for God knows, I never distrust you, but I know that Rob and I've been uneasy about Malcolm ever since that woman was shot in the Glen. I haven't liked the looks of the lad; I've had a sort of presentiment, I think, that he had something to do with it, for I knew that Rob and he were out on the hills that day."

"And what are you going to do? Sit down and let a foul suspicion fall on him without trying to clear it up?"

"My dear, let us see what they do; the longer this is kept quiet, the better it is for Malcolm now."

And before it was dark they knew at Airlinn what they were going to do. Jack was sitting with bent head over his desk, and he had a look of gloom upon his face. He had been thinking of the unhappy woman in the Glen, and he was wondering how he could help her.

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"My dear, let us see what they do; the longer this is kept quiet, the better it is for Malcolm now."

She stood there with erect form and flashing eyes, fighting the battle for her absent son.

"Send for Rob Mackenzie," she said; "let the boy come here, and see if he dare repeat this base lie before Malcolm's mother."

"My poor Jeanie, it's no use," answered Jack with a groan. "If Malcolm's hands were clear, why did he go away? And, Jeanie, I haven't told you, for God knows, I never distrust you, but I know that Rob and I've been uneasy about Malcolm ever since that woman was shot in the Glen. I haven't liked the looks of the lad; I've had a sort of presentiment, I think, that he had something to do with it, for I knew that Rob and he were out on the hills that day."

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